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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with a survey on three case studies of various arrangements for intercultural learning via the Internet in Europe. On the one hand, the empirical research is based on theoretical reflections about intercultural competence needed in a multicultural society, and on the other hand, it is grounded in the pedagogical discussion of media competence. The main goal of the research is to determine the sustainability of Internet-based learning arrangements and a virtual mobility for campus-based students. (Contains 14 references.) (Author)

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Transcultural learning in Internet-based learning environments – European methods and experiences

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Abstract: This paper deals with a survey on three case studies of various arrangements for intercultural learning via the Internet in Europe. On the one hand the empirical research is based on theoretical reflections about intercultural competence needed in a multicultural society on the other hand it is grounded in the pedagogical discussion of media competence. The main goal of the research is to determine the sustainability of Internet-based learning arrangements and a virtual mobility for campus based students.

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1. Introduction

With the technical development of the World Wide Web in the early 1990's, the Internet was theoretically accessible for everyone, at least in the industrial nations. Without a doubt, the traditional electronic media could never have triggered such a development as has the fusion of computer, telecommunication and electronic media (Willke 1997). This can be largely traced back to the optimization and redesigning of communication processes which present a possibility for businesses to respond to the higher demands regarding costs, quality and flexibility in the international marketplace. According to OECD estimates, 30% of the volume in the areas of communication, finance and smaller trade and 20% in education, public health and government will be influenced by the electronic trade (OECD 1999, 9).

A general increase of Internet users can be counted on worldwide. Virtual contact situations will be thus influenced especially by the giants of intercultural and media competence. An intercultural competence in virtual contact situations can contribute to both a globalized and regionalized society, permitting peaceful co-existence since they lead to a large degree to the dismantling of prejudices and stereotypes. Yet the interaction between intercultural and media key competencies is rarely considered, let alone the subject of social competence, which can be regarded as decisive in global as well as regional contact situations in the Internet. This contribution will deal next with the relationship between intercultural competence and internet based virtual mobility situations, in order to enrich consciously the very technically oriented discussion with one further aspect. Based on the mutual influence between Internet and intercultural competence, the influence of a social competence through virtual mobility will be discussed through the demonstration of three case studies. Due to the paradigmatic character of the chosen case studies, this can be of definite importance for the development of a 'global social competence' via virtual mobility.

2. Transcultural competence and virtual mobility

Just how far the Internet poses a chance for intercultural learning depends very much on how far the Net lends itself to learning processes. The question is which new opportunities the Internet-based learning environments for virtual mobility offer for the development of intercultural competence for learners of different anthropological backgrounds. With that, two central problems are raised:

- How should the target size of a transcultural competence be designed in relationship to the development of a virtual world?
- Which Internet learning environments should be chosen from the existing multitude in order to arrive at lasting design criterion?

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One possible target size lies in the connection of the effects of the new media with a differentiated understanding of society. Today, a meeting of cultures is let loose from a central nation state through the new media. This is due to the continually progressive supplementation of the national electronic and printed media through new international media, which obey other principles altogether (Schröder/Zimmer 1995). If media in the nation states is on the whole only planned for its linguistic region, global media of international communities orientates itself toward its multilingual users[1]. At the same time, technical development makes the integration and interactive design of various media possible. At this point the process of community creation becomes increasingly important since social actors can join forces with one another or with many others out of common interest. This process will be made easier in the international context through the Internet. And with it, a substantial importance of the new media could be in making possible the formation of transnational societies which themselves consist of many sub-societies. The new media therefore has the ultimate effect of being identity-founding. These transnational societies unite people of different cultures; for example, through trade, immigration and emigration or through common activities in the Internet by virtual mobility. This doesn't mean that the state and the related concept of the international society become obsolete or that the artificial particalization of the society must increase (Kleger 1997). This transnational space is at the same time transcultural, requiring a corresponding competence from the social actors which can no longer be fixed to an intercultural understanding. It must concern itself with a transcultural competence which allows the social actors to deal with many cultures of the transnational society, since with the multitude of contact possibilities, not all specific cultural competencies can be conveyed. Objectives for a virtual mobility can therefore be culture-overlapping fundamental competences, to which a transcultural social competence belongs, consisting of sociability, communicative flexibility and sensitivity.
To the solution of the second initial problem – which Internet learning environments should be drawn upon for the analysis of intercultural learning via virtual mobilty in the Net – a categorization lends itself which has been obtained from the analysis of world-wide collaborative learning environments for presence universities. It is concerned with learning environments which work by sensitization through explanation and training (Type 1), through consensus creation (Type 2) and through knowledge construction (Type 3) (see Ribold/Weber, 1998). For Type 1, case study CCED (Cross Cultural Explorations and Dialogue) has been chosen, whereby it should be mentioned that since winter 1998, this training with online-communication has been expanded with accompanying video conferencing. At the time of the interviews, this feature hadn't yet been predicted. DEMETER (Distance Education Methods in Teacher Education and research) was chosen for Type 2 and HALÜBO (Hamburg/Lüneburg/Bochum) for Type3.
(There will be a hands-on demonstration of the three leraning environments during the presentation.)

3. Analysis

The data collection in winter 1997/98 for the three case studies works with a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. In order to receive specific information about the environments within a university system, the data, which is analyzed here, has been taken from the data pool of the German universities about the three projects. There were three collection methods in total. A questionnaire was distributed before and after the courses so that distinctive personality characteristics of the learners of the environments could be identified. A qualitative analysis of the communication environments, such as message boards, ensued from a look at the intercultural or rather, transcultural learning process which included the comparison of the categorization according to the Software Typology of Baumgartner and Payr (1994). With regard to the enduring effects of the study results, interviews with experts were conducted in connection with a workshop.

The main objectives of the study are as follows: the study should indicate effects of the technical and pedagogic variations of Internet learning environments. It should also indicate the typical changes in distinctive personality characteristics in regard to the target size of a transcultural competence. The study should finally determine general construction criterion of Internet learning environments with regard to pedagogic constructivism.

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[1] In this contribution, we will address the tendency toward globalization through the Internet only, not that of regionalization, which exists as well. The analysis of the language usage of websites indicates that the 'globalization language' English does not play the dominant role as was supposed. Websites are mostly bilingual, in a national language plus English: this points out the further creation of regional and local virtual space, in which the intercultural and media competences remain indeed as equally important as in the global space (Databank Consulting 1997).

4. Results [2]

The results of the exploratory study conducted before the start and at the end of the courses (with 173 students who had rather weak international and technical knowledge beforehand) can be divided into three areas: efficacy of the learning environment on the learner, typical distinctive personality characteristics and their changes after the courses and finally, the potential for innovation of the Internet learning environments of these three types. In the following, the results regarding the distinctive personality characteristics will be introduced by way of examples. These characteristics constitute the core of the study since it is through them that the question of which learning environment best supports the development of transcultural competence will be investigated. Transcultural competence was set within a sub-construction of the question which consists of 16 dimensions and 41 variables. The variables were adapted from the personality research for transcultural inquiry. The analysis pursued Latent class analyses (LCA), in order to procure typical answer patterns (Rost, 1990, 1996).

Figure 1 shows an example of 4 typical answer patterns in the dimension sociability, as appearing before and after the Internet courses. The largest group before the course is the "hesitant" type who, although having only minor anxiety towards other cultures, is quite hesitant in establishing and maintaining contact themselves. Less hesitant is the second type before the course (the "sociable" type), who also demonstrates strengths in establishing contact. The evidence for mistrust towards people from other cultures is rather ambivalent, existing only at the beginning. The "sociable" type reappears again after the course and in this case, comprised over 60% of the students. A learning effect had taken place as the sociable group is by far the biggest; even when the individual LCA types don't have to be composed of the same people.

The hesitant type no longer appears after the courses; rather a more active type with noticeably little anxiety regarding foreign cultures. A general finding is that the Internet courses led to increased sociability for most participants. This result is repeated for nearly all 16 dimensions of the measured distinctive personality characteristics. After the courses there was a general gravitation by all the types toward the categories of transcultural competences and at the same time towards a higher positive response niveau. One can therefore assume an overall positive influence of the Internet learning environments on transcultural learning success.

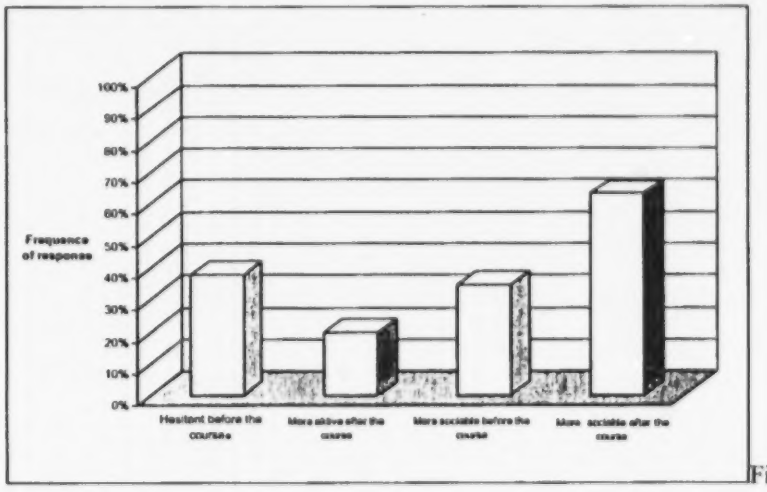

Figure 1: Sociability dimension

The point of departure for a look at the changes in the differentiations after the three Internet courses is the classes or types of the LCA analysis, as described above. According to these types and with the help of cross-tabulation, it will be investigated in which typical response pattern differenentiations occur after the course. Within the first dimension, hardly any differentiations in the strengths can be found in the discrete examinations of the courses for the categorization of the types 'Hesitant' and 'Sociable'. All three courses in this dimension more or less reach the

[2] Some preliminary results were published in: P. Marquet, A. Jaillet, S. Mathey, E. Nissen (eds.) (1999). *Actes d'IN-TELE 98*, Berlin: Peter Lang,.

objective of increasing sociability in the participants after the course. This can be explained by the design of the courses, in which all three included a phase of direct contact with the help of the medium of Internet (e-mail, chat, etc.). Two special features result through the technical construction stipulations of the Internet. Firstly, independent of the pedagogic design, it is apparent that the participants are more sociable in intercultural situations through the inclusion of electronic communication possibilities which they themselves specify. Secondly, it became obvious that limits to the technical implementation of problem oriented environments exist due to their enhanced complexity which can lead to undesirable learning results despite the allowance for communicative target categories.

5. Discussion

On the whole, all three learning environment types studied proved capable of initiating a learning process centered especially in the area of social competence, going beyond culture toward a sociable, open and considerate learner. Within the framework of the exploratory character of the study, it can be suggested that the Internet is well suited to the construction of transnational societies since, through the development of social competence, the process of community creation will be supported. People of very different nations and cultures band together out of common interest. This bond can also be understood in terms of the perceptions of one's own subjectivity which are part of identity and culture developmental processes. In this way, culture can be understood as a complex bundle of subjectivities (experiences, values, norms, ideas, attitudes, dialects, etc.) and objectivities (activities, behavior, language, artifacts) which assist everyday orienteering and life mastery (Roth 1996, 260). With regard to Max Weber (1972), community creation can now be seen as the more subjective process, whereby individuals come to a group formation out of subjective reasons, in contrast to society creation in which the rather objective motivations play a role. For the future multicultural community, it is exactly the process of community creation which may possess the greatest creative potential. And with it one great importance of the new media for the world society could be that the new media actually has the effect of being identity-founding in a world of international and multicultural communities where it is possible to form international communities of various actors (organizations, individuals, businesses, etc.) consisting of many sub-communities. All these communities will cohere out of common interests and, from the start, need in no way, for example, follow the majority of any nation state.

It is also to be borne in mind that the best learning effect could be a result of a combination of the three types since a comprehensive transcultural competence cannot be provided by just one type of the Internet learning environments. This would be conceivable in serial modularity, although it would be problematic in the European university system which is neither institutionally nor organizationally very flexible. The teletutoring structure should therefore greatly influence the virtual and partially virtual universities of the future (Geyken/Mandl/Reiter 1998). At the same time, only few universities are likely to prevail as truly virtual institutions (single model) such as the University of Phoenix. They are rather likely to become more Add-on or More-Quality models (dual mode), which perform parts of their services virtually (Krempel, 1997).

6. Conclusion

In the future there will surely be more people who will have tertiary educational experience in a virtual space, even without being explicitly prepared for it by an educational institution. Therefore the existing concepts of multicultural education must automatically be questioned as to whether their concepts are adequate enough to prepare people for increasingly enmeshed cultures within corresponding learning processes. This doesn't mean that the area of tertiary experiences should obscure the other experience areas, but it should be prognostically assumed that it will play a larger role in hypermodern societies than in postmodern ones (Telepolis 1997).

Of much greater importance is that the ephemeral life-models of postmodernity - just as in hypermodernity – will retain their validity. It will be impossible for the individual to be prepared for the life-long challenges in the rapidly changing social roles, structures and duties. The decisive factor should be world-wide technical and trans-cultural competence since they make the individual citizen flexible in the specific creation of private and professional life-plans. As they are primarily coupled with the new media, they should also be striven for within its frameworks. The results of the studies, introduced here by way of example, advocate that virtual international Internet learning environments lead to a change in the learner's social competence with a view to a global social competence and virtual mobility Hence, it is to be in future even more intensively investigated how multicultural education concepts concerning the new media can be complemented.

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